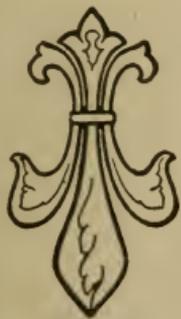


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EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY  
FOR ALABAMA BOYS AND GIRLS

A PLEA FOR LOCAL TAXATION AND  
THE LOCAL TAX AMENDMENT



AN ADDRESS

Delivered at the Final Meeting of the  
Jefferson County Teachers Associa-  
tion, Birmingham, Alabama,  
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BY

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## A PLEA FOR LOCAL TAXATION

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SOME one has said that it ought not to be necessary to discuss at length with any intelligent right-feeling man the right of every child to have the chance to make the most of his God-given faculties by education and the duty of the State and of the community to give him this chance by providing adequate means for his education.

In endeavoring to determine whether or not Alabama's public school system measures up to such an ideal, three lines of inquiry are pertinent:

1. How many children are in school and how many are out of school?
2. What character of teachers are employed in the schools?
3. What kind of school buildings and equipment are in use?

If we are in earnest about examining into our conditions and seek the underlying causes for our present humble status, we shall not have to go very far to discover them.

**1. POOR ATTENDANCE:** We have in Alabama 432,551 white children of school age and more than one-fifth of them, or in round numbers 90,000, did not so much as enter school for a single day last year. Those who did go attended for only three-fourths of the time the schools were in session and if the aggregate number of days attended could have been parceled out among all the white children of school age, the share of each would have been but sixty days. This is only another way of saying in the final analysis that our schools are at best not quite half as efficient as they ought to be in bringing an education within the reach of our sons and daughters or in bringing our sons and daughters within the reach of an education.

**2. SHORT SCHOOL TERMS:** Only five states fall below Alabama in the number of days the public schools are open each year. Our average school term for white children is only 135 days, and for rural districts alone, 118 days. Still more significant is the fact that in a number of the northern counties where the white population largely predominates, the school term often falls below 100 days. This means that the children have only one-third of the year in which they may exercise any option about school attendance, and that adequate educational opportunity is far from being offered is further attested by the fact that if all the pupils in these counties were to enter school, the facilities would be

hopelessly inadequate. There are just two ways for lengthening our school terms: Either we must provide more money, or we must make the money we have go further. The latter course would mean the further impairment of the already scant provision.

**3. POOR SCHOOLHOUSES AND EQUIPMENT:** In my official capacity, I am continually visiting rural communities and would naturally expect that when seeking to entertain me, friends would conduct me to the community schoolhouse. It is noticeable, however, that they take much more pleasure in showing me their poultry, pigs, stock, and growing crops. We all enjoy looking upon good thoroughbred "mortgage lifters;" they hold an important place in farm economy, but why do these friends take me to the barnyard or field rather than to the schoolhouse? There is but one answer—**THAT IS WHERE THEY HAVE INVESTED THEIR MONEY.** Not until our people have invested their money in thoroughbred school buildings will they take the same pride in their schools as they now take in the products of the farm.

Is it any wonder that the attendance is poor when the average rural community has less invested in the school plant than the price of the ordinary automobile, and spends for its maintenance, including the teacher's salary, less than the owner for the upkeep of his machine? The average amount invested in

school property for each child of school age is less than \$11.00, almost the lowest of all the states, as against the maximum of \$100 in Massachusetts and New York. If, as has been said, the amount a state has invested in public school buildings and grounds is the best index of its interest in education, what is there but painful humiliation in the fact that Alabama ranks forty-fourth among the states of the Union in the character of buildings and equipment she provides for her children?

**4. MEAGER EXPENDITURE FOR EACH CHILD:** The more money a state invests judiciously in its schools, the more excellencies they are likely to possess. There are states that are investing more than \$30.00 annually for each child in school, or eight times as much as Alabama,—North and South Carolina falling below. Only a fool would deny that in the long run, states, like individuals, get pretty nearly what they pay for; and this being the case, we have no right to expect to make a respectable showing in the sisterhood of states so long as we spend upon each child enrolled in school a daily pittance of less than eight cents, while a number of other states spend three and four times this amount. Are Alabama children three or four times as bright as other children,—or will a dollar in Alabama go three or four times as far as a dollar in other states? Unless one of these alternatives be true, we must plead guilty to the charge of stinginess, ignorance or poverty.

**5. POOR TEACHERS ON POOR SALARIES:** So long as more than two-thirds of our white teachers hold only second or third grade certificates; so long as these teachers remain a trifle more than a year at each school taught; so long as four years is the average length of service in our schools; so long as one-fourth of our teachers have not gone beyond the elementary school of seven grades, and so long as 1,200 of the 1,500 beginning teachers each year have never had any professional training whatsoever, we have no right to hope for anything but the poorest of teaching and the poorest of schools. Nor is that so much a reflection upon those engaged in teaching as upon the niggardliness and unwisdom of those who are responsible for financing the schools?

Alabama is less interested in the education of her children than is the country as a whole in almost any other vocation. They tell us that the average annual pay of a carpenter is \$802; of a coal miner, \$600; of a factory-hand, \$550; of a common laborer, \$513. Even the convicts in our mines are let out by contract for something like \$400 per year; and yet we continue to pay the men and women who teach in our rural schools the miserly sums of \$337 and \$293, respectively, for a year's work. A study of the salaries paid our teachers, in effect, will show that they have been decreased since the beginning of this century. A report from the United States Bureau of Education

sets out the fact that, based upon prices in 1897, wholesale prices in 1911 had increased 44% over the year 1907, while retail prices had increased 50%, and there has been a total increase in retail prices since 1897 of 62%.

We may not deny that the teacher's salary is both an index of the teacher's ability and the stamp of approval which the community places upon the teacher and the school. That our present teaching force is being paid all it is worth is not the question; the fact remains that so far as the education of our children is concerned, we neither ask for nor desire,—much less deserve, efficient service.

The influence the above deplorable conditions might reasonably be expected to have on our literacy is fully borne out by the facts: Only five states fall below Alabama in white illiteracy, and only one in colored illiteracy. We cannot, therefore, as some have tried to do, justify our humble position as to intelligence by the presence of our colored population. We may disregard entirely the 31,661 white men and the 33,765 white women in Alabama who cannot read and write, and think only of the 27,000 children between the ages of ten and twenty who cannot know firsthand the contents of any book or the meaning of any printed characters, and we still have the strongest possible indictment against Alabama for not offering even respectable educational opportunities to her sons and daughters.

It is not fair to assume that the penurious policy we are following is either studied or understood. The fact is, we have not looked beyond our own community, do not know what is going on elsewhere, and are unwilling to listen to the experience of others. If our people could see the wonderful strides that are being made in states naturally less fortunate than ours, and with a population more heterogeneous and transient; if we only had eyes to see what is going on across the border lines of our own state even, there is no doubt that we would get a new conception of duty and adopt a new course of action.

The one supreme condition which overshadows all others, the one obstacle which bars all substantial progress, is lack of funds for a business-like administration of our schools. No investment in any other field could produce so large returns. More money would give us better schools; better schools would give us better citizens; better citizens would produce more money,—a never-ending beneficent circle.

Admitting that the improvement of educational conditions in Alabama is dependent upon additional revenue, the question arises as to how we should best go about raising it. School funds in the United States are derived, upon the whole, as follows:

From local taxes, including county and district .....	72¢
From state taxes.....	15¢
From permanent funds.....	6¢
From other sources.....	7¢

The proportion of funds derived from local taxes varies from a minimum of 24% in Alabama to a maximum of 97% in Massachusetts and the proportion derived from state tax varies from a minimum of nothing in eight states to a maximum of 70% in Alabama. Do not the fact that the Alabama practice runs directly counter to the general practice in the United States, coupled with the low standing of our state in education, suggest that our method of raising revenue should undergo rigid investigation and perhaps radical reorganization?

In the transition from that conception of education which regarded it as a personal benefit for which those who received it should pay, to the present democratic theory that it is a public benefit for which the public should pay, some principles have become so well defined that they are universally accepted as axiomatic.

“Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

“But the indigence of the greater number disabling them from educating at their own expense those of their children whom Nature has fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments of the public, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expense of all than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or the wicked.”

“The wealth of the state should be taxed to educate the children of the state. A free common school education is the birthright of every American child, and this should be provided for by the taxation of property without reference to whether the owner has children to be educated or not.”

“The increased cost of living and the steadily increasing number and scope of educational activities, have rendered it necessary that a larger expenditure be made for schools than in the past. It therefore becomes imperative that all communities in the United States recognize, as many have already done, that more money must be contributed and expended for schools, both locally and by the state, if our young people are to have that kind and quality of education demanded by the times.”

“The mark of the true patriot is found in a willingness to pay a just share of tax for the support of the government and the education of the people.”

In the light of these principles and the conditions prevailing in Alabama, it is but fair to say that the problem of developing our school finances so as to guarantee the perpetuity of our democratic government is that of determining how our revenues are to be increased perpetually to meet the gradually increasing burdens. The problem of increasing the production of wealth is laid at the door of our public school system. That the obligation of educating the children of our state should rest upon the state on the basis of wealth, has a new meaning when the relation between progress and public education is understood.

Practice and experience in America show that for the provision of funds to maintain schools, there should be:

1. Sufficient local taxation, county and district, to encourage local pride and initiative.
2. Sufficient state taxation to equalize educational advantages by aiding poorer communities.

The Conference for Education in the South, composed of the leading business men and educators of the Southern States, and the Southern Educational Association, the leading exponent of educational ideals in the South, at their joint session in Louisville in 1914, adopted a report formulated by their standing committees, outlining a state school system, its ad-

ministration and finance for Southern States, which contained among other things, the following:

“The state as a whole should guarantee an educational opportunity to all her children regardless of the wealth or poverty of the particular county or district in which they live. The state, the county, and the school district should each supply a proper quota of the funds for the proper maintenance of the schools.”

If the resources of the state were equally distributed and could be kept so; if the land were uniformly improved and could remain so; if the wealth of the state were parceled out on a per capita basis and provision were made for automatically equalizing it in the future, we might then confine our source of revenue to one unit, provided that such a unit should be the smallest one required to maintain an approved rural school. But so long as our resources are varied, our activities diversified, and our desires different, to limit ourselves to any one plan for raising revenue with which to finance our schools and to disburse the funds on a per capita basis to the several counties of the state, would mean that certain geographical divisions of the state would of necessity be discriminated against, and therefore arrayed against certain other geographical divisions.

A uniform state tax is the most satisfactory way to equalize educational opportunity within

certain limitations. But when we take into consideration the fact that the funds in Alabama are apportioned to the counties on a per capita basis and are thereupon distributed by the county boards upon a race basis, we know that the white children in so-called "white" counties and the negro children in so-called "black" counties receive only a slender portion.

An examination of the statistics contained in the Annual Report of the Department of Education for the year 1913-14 will show that the amounts expended for teachers' salaries for each child enrolled in the public schools of six counties, including three so-called "white" counties and three Black Belt counties, together with the ranking of each county for the sixty-seven counties of the state, in the amount so expended, are as follows:

**GROUP 1.**

County.	Rank.	Per Capita.
Winston .....	67	\$ 3.75
Marion .....	66	4.09
Cullman .....	65	4.68

**GROUP 2.**

Lowndes .....	1	36.61
Bullock .....	2	31.61
Dallas .....	4	29.00

It will be observed that the amount expended for each white child varies from six to ten times as much for the counties in the second group as for the counties in the first group.

and if the investigation is carried a little further, it may be found that the corresponding amount expended in Lowndes for negro children is \$2,13, Bullock \$1.35, and Dallas, \$2.16.

Again, when we compare the length of school terms for white children, we find the schools to be in session in these counties, as follows:

**GROUP 1.**

Winston .....	85 days
Marion .....	88 days
Cullman .....	124 days

**GROUP 2.**

Lowndes .....	147 days
Bullock .....	168 days
Dallas .....	172 days

The term for the Black Belt counties is seen to vary from four months to two months and a half longer than in the white counties.

In the matter of the number of pupils each teacher is required to handle in the white schools of these counties, the same is found to be as follows:

**GROUP 1.**

Winston .....	45
Marion .....	50
Cullman .....	52

### GROUP 2.

Lowndes .....	15
Bullock .....	23
Dallas .....	24

A teacher in Winston county is required to handle thirty more pupils than a teacher in Lowndes county, while a teacher in Cullman county is required to handle twenty-eight more pupils than a teacher in Dallas county, and it may also be ascertained that a negro teacher in Bullock county is required to handle eighty-eight pupils, or thirty-six more than a white teacher in Cullman county. We would expect to find the qualifications of the teachers in the first group of counties to be inferior to those in the second group of counties, and the facts sustain the conclusion. The percentages of the whole teaching force in the three counties holding first grade and life certificates follow:

### GROUP 1.

Winston .....	23%
Marion .....	29%
Cullman .....	11%

### GROUP 2.

Lowndes .....	48%
Bullock .....	71%
Dallas .....	58%

Another basis for estimating the character of the work done in these several counties might be the salaries paid the teachers, which are as follows:

**GROUP 1.**

	<b>Male.</b>	<b>Female.</b>
Winston .....	\$176	\$145
Marion .....	209	165
Cullman .....	261	261

**GROUP 2.**

Lowndes .....	762	424
Bullock .....	904	477
Dallas .....	665	436

If we view these tables as a whole, we find that a child in Winston county will probably have a teacher receiving not less than \$145 nor more than \$176, holding a third grade certificate, with forty-five pupils to be taught for a term of eighty-five days in the year, while a pupil in Lowndes county will probably have a teacher receiving a salary from \$424 to \$762, holding either a first or second grade certificate, with only fifteen pupils in school and for a term of 147 days. For the child in Winston county, the state appropriation and the county one-mill tax together provide the princely sum of \$3.75, while for the Lowndes county child the state alone contributes \$36.61. No fair-minded man in Alabama would claim for a moment that the state has any right to discriminate in any such fashion against two children, both of whom are sooner or later to face the responsibilities of citizenship, and no man who has the interest of his children at heart could be expected to settle in Winston county when the odds are so much more favorable for the education of his children in

Lowndes. We boast of our democracy and of our equality of educational opportunity, but there can be no such thing as equality of educational opportunity in Alabama so long as a constitutional inhibition in effect says that a county like Winston, which has done all the law will let it do, shall receive only one-tenth the amount for each child in school that Lowndes county receives.

These tables, taken with the statistics of white literacy found in the report, also show that intelligence varies as the amount expended for each child increases. This may be seen from the table below in which the rank of the six counties as compared with the sixty-seven counties of the state as a whole, is given both in the amount expended and in literacy:

**GROUP 1.**

County.	Rank as to Amt. Exp.	Lit.
Winston .....	67	57
Marion .....	66	49
Cullman .....	65	46

**GROUP 2.**

Lowndes .....	1	1
Bullock .....	2	7
Dallas .....	4	2

While the rank in the two items is identical in only one case, the parallelism is so close as to give unmistakable evidence that to increase intelligence we must increase the amount expended on the individual child.

The absolute unfairness of the educational opportunity of a child in a so-called "white" county as compared with that of a child in the Black Belt county is clearly shown in the columns below in the amounts paid into the state treasury for school purposes by these counties, the three-mill constitutional tax, when contrasted with the amounts apportioned to each county for school purposes from the state treasury and the excess that each county receives over and above the amount paid in:

**GROUP 1.**

County.	Amount Paid Into State Treasury.	State Apportionment to County.	Excess.
Winston .....	\$ 6,252	\$12,864	\$ 6,602
Marion .....	10,460	17,542	7,082
Cullman .....	18,624	27,505	8,881

**GROUP 2.**

Lowndes .....	13,060	36,130	23,070
Bullock .....	15,135	34,145	19,010
Dallas .....	40,309	54,459	14,150

It will be noted that all of these counties receive more money from the state treasury for their schools than they pay in. This excess is derived, for the most part, from the counties of Jefferson, Mobile and Montgomery, which pay in, respectively, \$193,699, \$67,000, and \$14,000 more than they receive back again. Inasmuch as the Black Belt counties receive from two to three times as much as the white counties mentioned, can there be any earthly justifica-

tion for such favoritism when all of the six counties are recipients of the bounties of the counties of Jefferson, Mobile and Montgomery?

No one will deny that it is absolutely out of the question to think of an increase in the state tax at present. The fact that the conditional appropriations to public schools have not been released because of a depleted treasury is the only evidence needed to sustain this contention. But even if it were possible to have money given out at long range from Montgomery, it would be unwise to do so for a considerable number of counties in the state.

The purpose of the state tax is to require the strong to help the weak. Conditions are so different, occupations and industries so varied, and wealth is so unevenly distributed, that only by that pooling of effort which the state tax makes possible can a satisfactory approach be made toward equalizing the burden of maintaining public education which is for the general good of all. Just as all true philanthropy requires on the part of the beneficiary a response in keeping with his ability, so the state should distribute aid only where it is needed and only to such a degree as will leave room for the stimulation of healthy local interest and initiative. The constitutional provision requiring that the funds be apportioned to the counties on a per capita basis recognizes the equality of all children in the eyes of the

law, but the disbursement of the funds in the county recognizes the inequality of conditions prevailing in the county and gives the county board of education the opportunity to equalize educational opportunity amid divergent conditions. The present state tax is sufficient to give certain counties in which the negro population is relatively large, and under the prevailing plan of apportionment, enough funds to run their schools for eight months, while in certain other counties the schools are barely able to continue for four months. If the law assumes that educational conditions in the counties need leveling up, is there any reason why the same admission should not be made for the state where conditions are even more divergent than in any of its counties?

To raise the state tax and to continue to apportion it upon the present constitutional basis, merely means we would encourage waste and invite graft and besides entirely crush out local effort and support in some counties, inasmuch as we should have to double the amount of the tax to provide an eight-months' term in our poorer counties. In other words, we must either change our basis of apportionment or we must provide other machinery for raising revenue if we are to give the children in our poorer counties a square deal. The door of legal opportunity is now closed in the faces of these children, and they must forever be handicapped so long as their only opportunity for a fair elementary education is contingent upon

excessive tuition fees and supplements, which many of them are unable to pay and which always, in any community, are unequally enforced and unfairly dodged. It is a bold statement, but the facts abundantly justify it, either the per capita plan of apportioning funds should be changed or the poorer counties of the state should have individual opportunity for equitably raising revenue for the support of their schools.

Our only defense of the state tax is that it equalizes the burdens and advantages of education. The inequalities existing in the state are more pronounced, it may be, but certainly no more real than they are in any county of the state. The most casual glance at the map of Alabama will show that within the bounds of a single county there are areas which will always support a large and wealthy population, while there are other regions where the population will continue sparse and the per capita wealth small. Again, the location of railroads, mines, mills, and factories will tend to further increase the disparity between adjacent sections. Fortunately or unfortunately, the distribution of children follows other lines. In all of these localities, there are children to be trained and schools to be run. With the county as a unit, it will be possible to equalize the difference in educational opportunity over a relatively large area, thereby making the town and the rural communities in the rich and the poor districts, co-operate to the degree

that their mutual dependence and relationship justify. Since our own wealth comes from the soil through education, and our assurance of its possession depends upon the intelligence of the entire population, and inasmuch as the child with scant education will have the same privilege and responsibility at the ballot-box as the child with a liberal education, there is no argument that will justify the failure, much less the refusal to allow any county in the state to vote upon itself a tax for giving at least an elementary education to every boy and girl within its bounds.

Looking towards the removal of this constitutional inhibition which has tended to keep Alabama at the foot of the educational ladder, our Legislature has passed a bill authorizing the submission of an amendment to the people of the state, authorizing any county upon the vote of the qualified electors, to levy a tax, not to exceed three mills, for educational purposes, with the further proviso that when any county is levying as much as three mills, any district in the county, with the approval of the county board of education, may levy a tax for educational purposes in the district to be voted by the electors, not to exceed three mills.

A careful reading of the bill will show that while the maximum is three mills, any tax not exceeding that amount may be voted, if the county so desires, making the measure flexible enough to care for counties which need but lit-

tle additional revenue, and for other counties which need more. The measure also makes the same provision in case of districts which may wish to avail themselves of better opportunities than the state and the county funds together will provide.

It may be that some cities in the state will be disposed to fight the adoption of the amendment inasmuch as their burdens would be lighter if they could directly vote a district tax. Experience has shown that wherever the district tax precedes the county tax, the wealthier districts have fortified themselves with a levy sufficient to meet their own needs and have later resisted the levying of a county tax, just as certain wealthier counties which have levied enough funds to maintain their own schools have vigorously fought a state tax which would require them to assist other unfortunate counties in maintaining their schools.

We have in Alabama a better educational opportunity than most of the states of the Union, for the reason that we already have the state tax and are working downward towards local initiative and effort; unless forsooth, we have been dependent upon the state treasury so long that we shall be unwilling to carry any part of the burden. In most of the other states where the large percentage of revenue is raised locally, the sense of self-sufficiency and independence has been so strongly developed

that they are unwilling to assist the poorer localities in equalizing educational opportunity.

The cities of Alabama have no right to build a wall around themselves in the matter of raising revenue unless they are willing to confine the area from which they derive their support within this selfsame wall. To allow these cities to draw the best blood of the county to the municipality, to derive their wealth from the territory round about, without any obligation to give a portion of it back in return is a policy too selfish and too culpable to admit of any defense. The city is dependent upon the country and it owes the country at least the same kind of educational opportunity and privilege that it sets up for its own children.

It has required the best efforts of the friends of education in the state to secure the passage of the bill authorizing the submission of this amendment after a campaign extending over more than a quarter of a century. It remains to see whether the taxpayers of Alabama are willing to give to any county and to any districts thereof the right to say whether they will provide a reasonable amount of educational opportunity upon their own initiative and at their own expense. The county that has enough funds to equip and finance its schools will not be affected at all and under no condition can any tax be levied until the same has been duly advertised and voted by a majority of the qualified electors within the area

concerned. There is a sentiment against taxation and even the possibility of taxation, so much so that for very many people, reform means legislation which will make the other fellow pay the taxes. This is undemocratic and is founded upon prejudice, passion and narrow-mindedness. Taxation for schools is not a political question, in the restricted use of the term, nor is it a party measure, in the narrow use of that term. It is merely a provision for offering the same fair chance and square deal to the ragged, barefoot boy on the hillside that the state already offers to his city cousin; the same provision for intelligent motherhood to the pale-faced working-girl of a white county, as to her healthy cousin in the **Black Belt**.

If we sum it all up, the humble status of public education in Alabama is the logical outcome of our practical repudiation of the doctrine of local self-government with its attendant apathy of public opinion and poverty of public revenue.

The only remedial measure is local taxation, whose chief virtue is that it develops the people through their efforts to govern themselves. Local taxation will provide increased revenue and that is imperative, but "Its finest fruit will be the personal interest each citizen will acquire for the betterment of the school, the belief which will come to prevail that the schools are of the people, for the people, and by the

people, and the abiding conviction that the people are the repositories of their children's welfare."

It remains for the taxpayers of Alabama to say whether she shall accept the doctrine of democracy in education, and let them forever remember that any government by whatever name it may be called that prevents the people from improving their conditions is despotic and undemocratic.

Are we too poor to maintain schools? "The man who says so is the perpetuator of poverty. It is the doctrine which has kept us poor, which has driven more and more wealth from the State and kept more away than any political doctrine ever cost us."

Are we too poor to maintain schools? "The man who says so is the promoter of crime; for every dollar we save in education we shall spend five in prosecutions, in prisons, in penal settlements." Ignorance, unproductiveness and crime are antagonistic to society. A good teacher, a good schoolhouse and good equipment are their deadly foes. The means with which to banish them from every community in Alabama depend upon the successful issue of the local tax amendment.





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